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OCI No. 1074/74
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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Present West Bank Political Attitudes

If a free and internationally supervised plebiscite were held today on Jordan's occupied West Bank, a large majority would probably vote in favor of an independent Palestinian state dominated by the fedayeen-controlled Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). But if the choice were narrowed down to continued Israeli occupation or federation with Jordan, most Palestinians would accept the latter, albeit grudgingly.

Memories of Hashemite rule before the 1967 war have left most Palestinians on the West Bank--apart from the notables and large landowners--unenthusiastic about a re-union with Jordan even under the liberal terms for autonomy King Husayn has proposed in his federation plan. For most, fedayeen leaders, like Fatah chief Yasir Arafat, are still heroes.

Husayn and other senior Jordanian officials have maintained intermittent contact with the West Bank's traditional leaders, but have made very little effort to rally their support for a union with Jordan. Most of the more important notables--including such persons as Mohammad Ja'abari, major of Hebron; Anwar Nusaybah, former governor of Jerusalem; Ma'zuz al-Masri, major of Nablus; Hilmi Hannoun, mayor of Tulkarm; and Anwar Khatib, the King's "top reporter" on West Bank affairs--are pro-Hashemite anyway. Husayn would undoubtedly work primarily through these leaders to rally support for some form of Palestinian federation with Jordan, rather than direct union. The King is aware that even his staunchest supporters among the West Bank leadership are opposed to direct rule from Amman; they want the West Bank to have greater autonomy and a larger say in national affairs than it had before the June 1967 war.

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No one group or coalition of leaders can legitimately claim to speak for the West Bank, given its fragmented political system. Husayn has on occasion claimed to speak for all Palestinians, but even he admits that the PLO speaks for "certain factions." Between the King's men and the PLO's sympathizers is an amorphous group of businessmen, laborers, intellectuals and farmers who are believed to favor an independent Palestine, but believe that the West Bank needs time under a UN trusteeship to deal with the economic and political problems that independence would bring.

The fact that such an independent entity on the West Bank would be economically unviable has made very little impression thus far. Public opinion in fact has swung even more heavily in favor of independence and against Jordan as a result of the Arab summit's decision to designate the PLO as the sole legitimate spokesman for the Palestinian people at the Geneva peace talks.

Because of the fragmented nature of the political system on the West Bank and Israeli restrictions on political activity, however, the Palestinian population is no more cohesive than the PLO. Palestinian nationalism is still relatively new and it must compete with older loyalties to family, clan, and town that have long been the basis of political authority.

King Husayn may be able, therefore, to make some inroads into the PLO's popular strength. Thus far, however, he has engaged in little more than a holding action,

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Nor have the Arab terrorists been particularly active. There have been a few incidents of intimidation and the PLO reportedly has begun to channel funds into the area in order to build up an organization. But PLO leaders have been pre-occupied and split over the kind of general strategy to adopt toward the Geneva peace talks.

Yasir Arafat seems to stand almost alone at present in favoring the establishment of a Palestinian government-in-exile and PLO participation in the peace negotiations. To

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diffuse some of the opposition to his position, Arafat reportedly is considering suggesting that the PLO play a largely behind-the-scenes role in any independent Palestinian state that is set up in order to be free to "carry on the struggle" against Israel. The position Syria finally takes on the peace talks, however, will probably have more impact on the PLO's own decision than any suggestions Arafat might make.

There are few known contacts between the PLO leadership, headquartered in Beirut, Damascus, and Cairo, and the Palestinian leadership from the West Bank and Gaza. Most fedayeen leaders realize that Palestinians in the occupied territories have a right to participate in the selection of the leaders of any future Palestinian state. Certain controversial personalities, such as Hebron Mayor Shaykh Ja'abari and Rashad Shawwa of Gaza, however, probably would not be acceptable. There is a nucleus of influential Palestinian intellectuals, mostly journalists and teachers, on the West Bank who have unimpeachable nationalist credentials. For the most part, however, they are not in regular contact with the exiled PLO leadership.

The only indigenous group that has even tried to organize a popular following has been the "Palestine National Front," an amalgam of former Communists, Baathists and independents, that has little influence. Although the Front has expressed support for the PLO, the PLO has refused to have any dealings with the organization and the Israelis have expelled several of the Front's better known members from the West Bank.

As testimony to the tight rein the Israelis exercise, the West Bank's own political leaders have remained largely spectators to events thus far. No well-known political figure or group has come forward with any proposals touching on the future of the area.

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